

# THE PRE-SOCRATICS

approx. 624-470 BCE

# THE PRE-SOCRATICS

## Some Prolegomena...

### The textual evidence

- » The evidence is piecemeal—all we have are *fragments* and second hand *testimonia*. As such, most accounts of the Pre-Socratics are interpretive reconstructions.

### The Pre-Socratic project (an interpretive overview)

- » Tried to provide a “rational” (*logos*) rather than a “mythological” (*muthos*) account/explanation of the origin and structure of reality
- » Tried to solve the problem of the “One and the Many” ('Being' and 'Becoming'). As such, they wrestled with two crucial questions:
  1. What is *the one* fundamental, unifying, underlying, enduring *archē* ('source', 'ruling principle', 'stuff') of reality?
  2. What is the principle/process of *change*? In other words, how does *the one* fundamental, unifying, underlying, enduring *archē* of reality give rise to, generate, produce, account for *the many* different changing things that we encounter in the world of experience?

# THE MILESIAN MONISTS

## Some Prolegomena...

### Who were they?

- » Thales
- » Anaximander
- » Anaximenes



### Where did they come from?

- » Miletus was a Greek seaport in Ionia on the western coast of Asia Minor known for its commerce, wealth and cosmopolitan ideas. As such, Miletus seems like the perfect birthplace for philosophical inquiry

### What did they *all* believe?

- » Despite their differences, all three of the Milesians assumed that the true nature of reality *could* be rationally accounted for/explained by means of a *single*, natural principle/substance. As such, they are often referred to as the Milesian *monists*.

# THE MILESIAN MONISTS

## The Textual Evidence...

*"Of those who first pursued philosophy, the majority believed that the only principles of all things are principles in the form of matter. For that of which all existing things are composed and that out of which they originally come into being and that into which they finally perish, the substance persisting but changing in its attributes, this they state is the element and principle of things that are..."*

*(Aristotle, Metaphysics 983b6-18 = 11A2)*



# THALES

## The Textual Evidence

*“However, not all [of these first philosophers] agree about the number and form of such a principle, but Thales, the founder of this kind of philosophy, declares it to be water. (This is why he indicated that the earth rests on water.) Maybe he got this idea from seeing that the nourishment of all things is moist, and that the hot itself comes to be from this and lives on this (the principle of all things is that from which they come to be), getting this idea from this consideration and also because the seeds of all things have a moist nature; and water is the principle of the nature of moist things.”*

*(Aristotle, Metaphysics)*



# THALES

## The *archē* of reality – WATER

### Why WATER?

- » Determinate, definite, intelligible substance/element
- » Essential to life— generation, nutrition, growth, etc
- » Has the ability to take on various forms (ice, steam, etc)

### What's the principle/process of *change*?

- » Mostly guesswork— But one possibility may be that water has the *inherent ability* to animate/transform itself and also cause/produce change in other things as well

### Difficulties with Thales' account...

- » The “problem of opposites”. If everything ultimately originated from and/or is ultimately composed of *water*, then how can Thales *archē* account for/explain the existence of fire or other dry things?



# ANAXIMANDER

## The Textual Evidence...

*"Of those who say that [the first principle] is one and moving and indefinite, Anaximander, son of Praxiades, a Milesian who became successor and pupil to Thales, said that the indefinite (to apeiron) is both principle (archē) and element of the things that are, and he was the first to introduce this name of the principle. He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other indefinite nature, from which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them; and the things from which is the coming-to-be for the things that exist are also those into which is their passing-away, in accordance with what must be..."*



# ANAXIMANDER

## The Textual Evidence

*For they give penalty and recompense to one another for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time—speaking of them in rather poetical terms. It is clear that having seen the change of the four elements into each other, he did not think it fit to make some one of these underlying subject, but something else, apart from these.”*

*(Simplicius, Commentary on Aristotle's Physics)*



# ANAXIMANDER

## The *archē* of reality – *APEIRON*

### Why *APEIRON*?

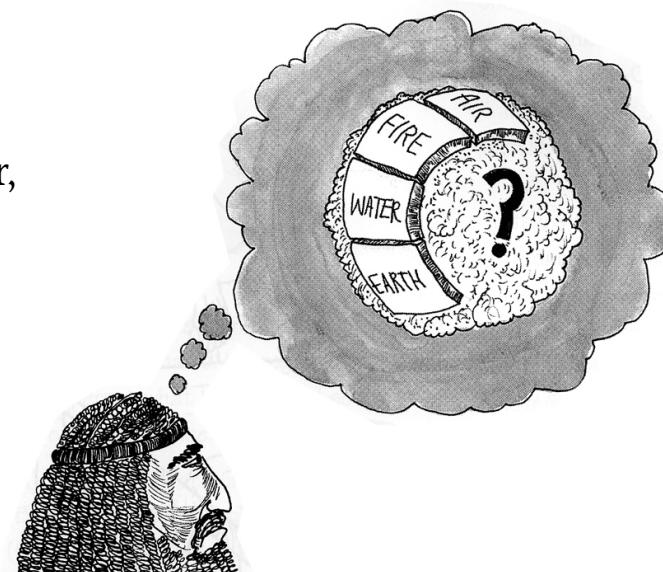
- » Given the problem of opposites facing Thales' account, the *archē* must not be wet or dry, hot or cold, etc.
- » Indeterminate, indefinite (lacking properties), neutral, independent of the basic elements and their opposites

### What's the principle/process of *change*?

- » Initial, simultaneous “separating off” of the elements
- » Regular, continual conflict between “warring opposites”. The opposites act on, dominate each other, etc producing a system of change governed by time.

### Difficulties with Anaximander's account...

- » How intelligible is the *APIRON*?
- » A slightly different “problem of opposites”. Can something essentially indefinite really give rise to definite things?



# ANAXIMENES

## The Textual Evidence...

*"Anaximenes ... like Anaximander, declares that the underlying nature is one and boundless, but not indeterminate as Anaximander held, but definite, saying that it is air. It differs in rarity and density according to the substances [it becomes]. Becoming finer it comes to be fire; being condensed it comes to be wind, then cloud, and when still further condensed it becomes water, then earth, then stones, and the rest come to be out of these. He too makes motion eternal and says that change also comes to be through it."*

*(Theophrastus, quoted by Simplicius, Commentary on Aristotle's Physics)*



# ANAXIMENES

## The *archē* of reality – AIR

### Why AIR?

- » Indeterminate, definite, intelligible substance... capturing the best of both Thales and Anaximander
- » Essential to nature (fire, water and earth), the primary sign of life ('soul' or 'breath of life')

### What's the principle/process of *change*?

- » The rarefaction (expansion) and condensation (compression) of air is the mechanism/process that accounts for the relation between *the one* and *the many*
- » Supported by crude experimental results

### Difficulties with Anaximenes' account...

- » Vulnerable to counterexamples... On Anaximenes' account, rocks, which are condensed air and therefore ought to be cold, can nevertheless be hot. Likewise, wind, which is thin air and ought to be hot, can be cold

